



Conseil
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**"LEARNING FOR REAL:
TESTIMONIES ON THE STAKES
AND CONDITIONS
FOR QUALITY PUPIL
DEVELOPMENT"**

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**SUMMARY OF THE 1984-1985
ANNUAL REPORT ON THE STATE
AND NEEDS OF EDUCATION
IN QUÉBEC**

**"LEARNING FOR REAL:
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AND CONDITIONS
FOR QUALITY PUPIL
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Learning for Real: Testimonies on the Stakes and Conditions for Quality Pupil Development¹

What are the pedagogical and institutional factors that have an immediate impact on learning in our educational system? The Conseil supérieur de l'éducation asked this question to hundreds of young people and adult students who are currently pursuing their education in primary and secondary schools, colleges and universities. The answers provided by interviews formed eloquent testimonies on the stakes and conditions relating to education as seen by the pupils and students themselves. These testimonies, then, form the basis of the *1984-1985 Annual Report on the State and Needs of Education* that the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation is legally obliged to transmit to the ministre de l'Éducation.

Pupils and students of all ages were invited to talk about their actual learning experiences based on real situations. Their remarks concerning the learning process dealt mainly with their desire to know, the difficulties they encountered and the methods they felt were most stimulating and effective.

The data gathered indicated that several points remained constant and consequently these were emphasized in the Annual Report entitled: "Learning for Real: Testimonies on the Stakes and Conditions for Quality Pupil Development".

I — Acute Awareness of the Economic Climate

Students showed deep concern about the socio-economic climate. This acute awareness of the economic situation is constant throughout all levels of education. *At the primary and secondary levels, it is an unexpected trait of precocity.* In fact, when pupils begin school, they have a strong pragmatic motivation that drives them to learn, a surprising fact among children so young. Their world is not insular for they reveal that they are influenced at a young age by a social environment that makes them extremely aware of the fact that academic success is necessary. There is a general awareness, which at times borders on fear, of the uncertain job market and the threat of unemployment. This practical motivation is so strong that it may suppress all other incentives. The immediate significance of learning seems to have escaped many young people. They see their high school diploma simply as a means of obtaining a more satisfactory job.

Obviously, the positive effect that such economic concerns have on school attendance cannot be ignored; but, if the joy of learning and the desire for self-fulfilment do not take the place of this purely utilitarian motivation, learning could be exposed to deterioration and devaluation.

The extreme nature of such motivation makes the transition of many students to cegep much more difficult. In fact, this motivation plays an essential role in vocational guidance and leads to the following dilemma: to opt for a field that will be profitable from the point of view of job openings and technological changes or to choose courses that suit one's tastes

1. *Apprendre pour de vrai: Témoignages sur les enjeux et les conditions d'une formation de qualité.* 1984-1985 Annual Report, C.S.E., December 1985, p. 94. This report may be purchased at the Éditeur officiel du Québec.

and aptitudes. Although some cegep students will choose the second option, that is, to spend their lives in a field they enjoy even though they must excel to get ahead in a glutted profession, many others are more paralyzed than stimulated by the fear of not being able to find a job.

Furthermore, the concept of difficult economic times, which is often a factor in terms of orientation, frequently causes students to lose sight of the fact that learning is also for personal development and that the desire to succeed in life does not always mean using every opportunity in the hope of one day finding an employer.

Lastly, the major concern of profitability leads to a devaluation of certain areas of study. For this reason, pupils in social studies sometimes see themselves as poor relations. Such situations can be demoralizing and can result in creating real difficulties.

At the university level, students do not escape the problem of utilitarian motivation. Orientation is often done in relation to the opportunities available on the job market, even if options depend on constraints which are not of a purely socio-economic nature. The quotas that exist in programmes considered as particularly viable play an important selective role. Moreover, students in social studies deplore the hierarchical organization which assigns greater value to the natural science programme because of the future prospects it offers. This explains the root of the malaise which exists in faculties that have lost prestige and where students feel they are regarded as being less capable.

Finally, *in adult education, the socio-economic motivation is fundamental.* The desire to learn is indisputably linked, in an obvious and legitimate fashion, to the constraints of the economic climate. This motivation which is already strongly felt by many people who are active in the labour force, is felt even more intensely by individuals involved on a full-time basis in retraining programmes. One goes back to school primarily to obtain a minimum of knowledge and basic skills which are officially recognized by a diploma which, in turn, is valued by employers, or else one seeks the skill itself rather than its sanction by a diploma.

II — Competence — To Avoid Future Disillusionment

The testimonies heard indicated a real need for a guarantee that each level of instruction will effectively ensure the achievement of the objectives stated, due to consistent and quality education. In fact, pupils and students are more critical of the value of their learning process than of the education system itself. *By looking back over their development they can judge the weaknesses in a process which, in their opinion, often leaves them starved.*

The tolerance of a school system that permits students, who have not mastered the particular skills of a given level, to move ahead to the next one is criticized. The acquisition of basic skills is thereby deferred to a later date. This also explains why young people have developed a false sense of self-confidence because of too much laxity, later blame the system when they are grappling with their own fundamental deficiencies, especially with regard to language and work habits. Students at post-secondary levels generally complain that they have an inadequate mastery of their own language. One of the most frequently repeated messages deals with the need for a more concentrated approach to the mother tongue in high

school. Teaching the mother tongue remains theoretical and does not lead to the acquisition of grammatical automatism, the ability to express one's thoughts or the skill to understand what is read. Language deficiencies are also among the transition difficulties experienced by students entering cegep or university.

The same applies to the lack of sound work habits. Cegep and university students believe that a high percentage of their peers may leave high school with neither practical experience nor independent study skills, despite the diploma obtained.

Moreover, *the majority of senior high school students, as well as cegep students, are convinced that the school addresses only a fraction of their potential* and that it is not difficulty which demobilizes them but rather abstraction, lack of interest and too much easiness. The latter seems to be very much in evidence at the high school level where, on occasion, boredom is perceived as being associated with the repetitive and fastidious nature of the instruction dispensed. It also causes concern with regard to the value and futility of the learning process as preparation for higher studies.

This explains, for the ten to fifteen year old group, why there is a deterioration in academic development. For some pupils, it is not always the difficulty of the work but the lack of stimulation; they settle for minimum performance, they are content with the easy route and let themselves drift until the stakes become serious. Many older pupils and students believe that easiness and tolerance in the school system act as pitfalls and they have no qualms about denouncing the lasting harmful effects of a learning process that has been in "low gear" for too long.

III — Concreteness is Essential

The demand for concrete experiences is made from primary level to adult education.

In the first year of the primary level this need seems to be met because, among kindergarten children, learning activities are usually associated with play activities. Similarly, in the first cycle of the primary level, the more skilled educators use practical hands-on techniques and simulations to help pupils unknowingly acquire knowledge and skills. The dynamic classroom, somewhat like kindergarten, involves the children in group projects and situations relating to their life experiences. However, it should be pointed out that this form of pedagogy is not prevalent, as is evidenced by a fairly large number of schools.

In grades five and six, the desire for concrete instruction is confused with the desire for interesting instruction. In fact, pupils consider instruction interesting if their own experiences are used, if the work themes take advantage of everyday life to expand their knowledge and experiences, in order to explain the more abstract questions. The difficulties that children experience in their academic development are attributable not so much to the subjects themselves but to the abstract manner in which they are presented.

When pupils reach cegep, they want vocational training courses to be more practical, either by successful simulation or apprenticeship periods. They also want teaching institutions to delve deeper into the realization and practical application of the acquirements, by group initiatives and by taking on responsibilities which, because of the experience thus acquired, enrich the learning process begun in class and by individual assignments.

To university students, concrete knowledge means that which is mastered and relevant. Students believe that this is where the practical aspect of instruction comes in. In fact, they also believe that one of the criteria for quality in university level instruction, is the application of theory in exercises or apprenticeships which will measure the degree of competency. Student community service centres which create new relations between students, teachers and economic agents are useful for this purpose. This also allows students to develop their own creative potential while giving them the opportunity to learn more about their environment. Finally, such procedures prevent the programme from becoming too distant from social realities. Through the initiatives of these centres, students find answers to their concerns in the re-evaluation of the university's social role.

In adult education, requirements regarding the concrete aspect which instruction programmes must include is reflected in the demand for apprenticeship periods, in relevant job areas, which are well defined and which include follow-up activities. The difficulty of experiencing appropriate apprenticeships was pointed out with regard to vocational training programmes.

IV — "Encadrement" — Stepping Stone to Quality Pedagogy

The testimonies heard indicate a need for an adapted "encadrement" which would extend beyond high school. Indeed, the major importance of human relations in the learning process is acknowledged in the testimonies. Moreover, particularly fertile pupil-teacher relationships act as a catalyst for the academic remediation of pupils with learning difficulties.

At the beginning of formal education, as well as throughout primary schooling, the attitude of teachers towards pupils has a tremendous effect on their learning development. Pupils believe that teachers must provide them with respect, personal attention, acceptance which is not dependent on academic performance, and confidence in pupils' potential which is not exclusively intellectual.

According to educators, such emotional security is necessary because of the break-up of many families. Children want the teacher to be concerned with their success and also want support to be provided accordingly. Children hope that the teacher will let them experience success and that the visible diversity in their rate of progress will be modulated so that the less able will not become discouraged.

These cordial attitudes do not prevent a high level of pupil success; in fact they generate quality pupil effort and results. It would be inadvisable to believe that quality effort and results are achieved more easily through strictness and prompt reprimands. It must be noted that the ideal teacher, portrayed by pupils, is generally a representation of positive experiences.

In high school, pupils acknowledge the fact that teachers must be strict but fair. Pupils want authority to be directly related to learning. It must not be defined in terms of power struggles. Pupils prefer teachers who provide discipline, who do not punish more than they help, who encourage, listen and talk, who are patient and who have confidence in the pupil. The educator held in high esteem is the one who has an honest desire to see all of his students succeed. Pupils regard serious difficulties between themselves and teachers as deviations and

even as a negation of the right to learn, often interpreted as something unfortunate and an exception to the rule. Problems regarding the value, significance and relevance of learning often seem more important than difficult pupil-teacher relationships.

On the other hand, most cegep students believe that they enjoy considerable autonomy in their use of time and consider the near-indifference of their teachers towards their work and attendance as normal. This newfound independence is very much appreciated but, in fact, those who are not well oriented need the guidance of their instructors. Some cegep students speak highly of the benefits they receive from the experience of being assisted by professorial teams, an approach used by some colleges. Rather than tutorials, these are authentic support programmes, provided by experienced staff; they are major contributions in preparing young adults for responsibility.

Moreover, many successful college students in vocational training confidently assert that the quality of their teachers is a major asset. Another example identified is a group of natural science students who have a very positive appreciation of teachers who "like their students and their subject". These students have no desire for a paternalistic approach since they believe their courses have been conceived for adults.

On the other hand, students who are adrift deplore the fact that their teachers do not help them. "Teachers are not interested in teaching us, they say. Three out of five don't care...". They therefore demand educators who are not only able but who are anxious to communicate.

Lastly, students who have a fairly positive attitude towards their cegep experiences strongly favour interesting courses given in an obliging rather than indifferent atmosphere.

At university, the professor must be first and foremost an animator and communicator. This requirement, which is not exclusive to this level of learning, accentuates a challenge which nevertheless is characteristic of the level: the danger that teaching becomes secondary to research. In many faculties, students have realized the importance that universities attach to the "visibility" of professors in the field of research. Students object to the university's attitude which seems to place greater emphasis on the outward influence of its professorial body than on its pedagogical effectiveness. The lack of professor availability is severely criticized by students as well as the blasé, "laid-back" lecturing style of some professors who, according to students, put their classes on "auto-pilot".

Finally, in adult education, the support of educators and pedagogical "encadrement" are considered indispensable. Students point out that confident relationships with teachers represent a pedagogical factor that promotes learning. They feel helped and respected without being over-protected. In some excellent centres and programmes, the desired result is not what the instructor wants for the pupil, but rather what both want in a friendly rather than a hierarchical and oppressive relationship. Furthermore, adults appreciate the qualities of listening, availability, encouragement and motivation which they find in their teachers. They praise these teachers for their ability to deal with both pedagogical problems and personal guidance. In the vocational sector, students find enriching the fact that their teachers are close to the job market. The only shadow in the picture is the last minute recruitment of specialists who are not always trained to teach.

When all is said and done, *the desire to learn is not lacking in pupils and students.* The affirmation of this fact is clearly expressed and it constitutes one of the most striking elements of their remarks. However, this desire is vulnerable and dependent on the educational environment. Pupils and students want teachers who are able to captivate them

and convince them of the pleasure of learning which varies and increases with the amount of effort injected. The demand for interesting and concrete courses comes from the desire of pupils to learn, discover and master.

Conclusion

The Council's major finding is that young people and adults are concerned about "learning for real". The extreme diversity of situations prevents the Council from drawing conclusions, which would be uniformly viable for all. However, the testimonies heard have allowed the Council to view a revealing picture of student conditions from the perspective of learning experiences. They hold essential messages calling for action that should improve the quality of education in Québec. They deserve to be given due consideration.